DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 400 946 PS 024 584

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TITLE If at First You Don't Succeed, Ganbare, Ganbare, Ganbare.
PUB DATE 96
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New York, NY, April 8-12, 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; Childhood Attitudes; Concept Formation; Creativity; *Cultural Background; Foreign Countries; *Japanese Culture; Kindergarten; *Kindergarten Children; *Motivation; Parent Attitudes; Parent Role; *Persistence; Primary Education; Standards; *Success; Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS Educational Encouragement; *Encouragement; Japan; Japanese People

ABSTRACT

In Japan, it is a common belief that anyone can achieve success; all that is necessary is that one persists with utmost diligence, and almost anything can be accomplished. This study investigated the thoughts of Japanese children, parents, and educators regarding the cultural phenomenon of "ganbare" (persistence), which permeates Japanese society at all levels. Interviews were conducted with 50 kindergarten students in Japan, their teachers, and college instructors in early childhood education. The children's mothers responded to written questions regarding their concept of "ganbare." The results indicated that "ganbare" was interpreted by children as "happy and positive encouragement." The adults used this word as a spontaneous expression of encouragement to teach children the importance of persistence in their lives, although some adults speculated that an overemphasis on "ganbare" with children may create too much pressure. Findings suggest that instilling persistence in children is of prime importance in Japanese culture, and that expansion of the investigation to include school-age children would be beneficial. (Contains 28 references.) (Author/BGC)

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ED 400 946

If At First You Don't Succeed, Ganbare, Ganbare, Ganbare

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Paper presented at the 1996 Annual Meeting of
American Educational Research Association, April 1996.

PS 024584

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Abstract

In Japan, it is a common belief that anyone can achieve success, all that is necessary is for one to persist with utmost diligence, and almost anything can be accomplished. This study investigated the thoughts of Japanese children, parents, and educators regarding the cultural phenomenon of ganbare (persistence) which permeates Japanese society at all levels. Children who attended a group-oriented kindergarten, their teachers, and college instructors in early childhood education were interviewed. The children's mothers responded to written questions regarding their concept of ganbare. The results of this study indicated that ganbare was interpreted by the children as happy and positive encouragement. The adults spontaneously used this word as an expression of encouragement to teach the children the importance of persistence in their lives, although some adults speculated that an overemphasis of ganbare directed toward children may create pressure upon them. This study suggests that instilling persistence in children is of prime importance in Japanese culture.

The high achievement of Japanese children has become of paramount interest to western researchers, and various factors regarding their achievement have been examined (e.g., Bacon & Ichikawa, 1988; Stevenson, Lee, Chen, Stigler, Hsu, & Kitamura, 1990; Stevenson, Stigler, & Lee, 1986). Some researchers studied Japanese children's persistence (ganbaru) and found it to be the key factor in their academic success (Blinco, 1992; Boocock, 1991; DeVos & Suarez-Orozco, 1986; White & Levine, 1986). The Japanese dictionary, the Kojein, defines ganbaru (persistence) in two ways; to insist upon your own way, or to do and endure with your best effort without giving up. Tada (1985) explained that over 100 years ago, at the end of the Meiji era, the use of ganbaru took on a new meaning and began a new trend in Japanese society. People began using the expression, "ganbare" (persist), to compel and encourage others, as well as themselves to put forth their best effort .

The term ganbare can be compared to the western notion of volition. Volition, as defined by Corno, is "strength of will" (1993, p. 14). Applying one's self diligently to almost any task undertaken is one component of volition. Corno also has the opinion that volition should be included as a salient component in learning and schooling (1993). Other researchers found that diligence or persistence is one of the important learner dispositions (e.g., Rosegrant & Cooper, 1986; Rosegrant & Bredekamp, 1992). Teachers, parents, and environments need to support and strengthen children's development of persistence and new learning skills.

A number of researchers (Duke, 1986; Hendry, 1986; Simmons, 1990; Singleton, 1989; White & LeVine, 1986) refer to ganbare as a Japanese cultural theory of learning. One responsibility of teachers is to instill the sense of ganbare into students. In Duke's words, "Whenever there is a task to perform, an activity to participate in, or a test to prepare for, the child is encouraged by the teacher to ganbare" (p. 127). When visiting 14 day care centers and 10 kindergartens, Shigaki (1983) observed Japanese teachers inspire this spirit of perseverance in children from infancy through the kindergarten years. She stated that "Observations in centers indicated that persistence is in fact inculcated from infancy" (p. 21). Similarly, Singleton (1989) observed the spirit of ganbare among

Japanese children and explained that the Japanese emphasis on perseverance is the key factor in organizing Japanese education.

Blinco (1992) found that Japanese first graders showed more persistence in solving a task (a puzzle-like game with increasing levels of difficulty) than their American counterparts. She attributed this to Japanese mothers who played key roles in instilling persistence in their children from infancy. In Blinco's words, "Through the socialization process, the Japanese mother creates a home learning environment and transmits to her child the importance of persistence and hard work (1992, p. 415).

Because the early introduction of the spirit of perseverance during preschool years in Japan is a strong indicator of later success in school (Azuma, Kashiwagi, & Hess, 1981; Lewis, 1986), an investigation of how teachers and mothers impart this attitude to their children can serve as a useful guide in scrutinizing the relationship between persistence and achievement. Since none of the previously cited studies examined the feelings of young children or parents toward this cultural phenomenon, the purpose of this study was to investigate and describe the thoughts of children, educators, and parents. Additionally, it examined the motivation of adults to encourage persistence in children and described the Japanese conviction that perseverance is a stronger determining factor of a child's later success in school than natural talent.

The School

The interviews were conducted with children and their teachers at the Kawasaki Kindergarten. The school is located in Kawasaki city, a suburb of Tokyo, Japan. Japanese preschools are called kindregartens and include the equivalent of the kindergarten year in the United States and extend to the age 6 and one half year. Its curriculum is traditional; group-oriented cooperation and activities are encouraged (Korloff, 1993).

Informants

The informants were 50 kindergarten children (23 boys and 27 girls) from middle-income families. The mean age of the children was 6.2 years. The children's teachers (n=9), mothers of the children (n=36), the director, and the assistant director of the school were included. Four professors of early childhood education who were associated with the

school were also included in this study.

Method

The data came from interviews of kindergarten children, their teachers, the director, and the assistant director in a Japanese educational setting. The written responses from the children's mothers concerning ganbare were also collected. The questionnaires were sent to the mothers of all 50 children, 36 of whom returned their responses. Four professors of early childhood education were also included in the interviews. The informants were interviewed individually by the first author, who took notes in Japanese and later interpreted them into English. In order to verify the translations, two Japanese educational psychologists reviewed each response.

The data were analyzed according to McCracken's five stages of the qualitative analysis (1988). In the first stage, we read each statement with no concern for its relationship to other aspects of the text. In the second stage, we read each statement again and again to be familiar with the transcript. In the third stage, we began watching for patterns and themes to develop. In the fourth stage, among themes, patterns, similarities, and contradictions, we selected relevant material and discarded the irrelvant. And finally, in the fifth stage, we brought together the themes from each interview and unified them under the umbrella of the culture being studie, and related them back to the review of literature. The questions for adults and children are listed in the appendix.

Results

Several themes related to the ganbare phenomenon emerged from our analysis of the interview data. The children voiced their opinions that it is similar to happiness or positive encouragement. The adults gave other interpretations of the meaning of ganbare. We identified six major themes; ganbare as positive encouragement, as a process, as the development of locus of control, as a natural occurrence, as it relates to confidence, and as an important factor in children's lives.

POSITIVE ENCOURAGEMENT

When the children were asked how they felt when they were given reinforcement through the spirit of ganbare, 48 out of the 50 children invariably replied that it made them

happy. The children had a remarkable consensus that ganbare is a word of positive encouragement. For example, one girl exclaimed, "I feel thankful, and I do things with my best effort." A boy's response was, "I feel happy and also feel that I have to put forth my best effort." The reaction of yet another boy was, "It means that I have to do things with genki (an active, spirited, energetic attitude)."

Similar to the second definition of ganbare by the Kojien (the Japanese dictionary), when asked what ganbare meant to them, the children generally interpreted it as earnest perseverance until the end. A boy replied, "It means that we don't give up, we follow through till the end." The responses made by one girl further explained the meaning of ganbare, "It means that if you do things till the end and don't give up, you can do anything!" Another girl proclaimed, "It's like you work hard at something till the end."

LOCUS OF CONTROL

Although the children seemed to accept ganbare as a happy word of positive encouragement, some parents and educators claimed that they did not want to use it in a way that could pressure children. Instead, they want children to initiate persistence themselves. Research review regarding locus of control indicates that an indirect teaching style is related to children's inner locus (Loeb, 1975). Internally controlled children tend to consider that their actions determine their outcomes of behavior (Zander, 1993). One of the mothers noted, "Recently, I had the thought that if I am overbearing in encouraging my child to persist, it might create pressure on him, so I am attempting to play down its use." Another mother commented, "I think it is very important for my child to be persistent, however, we should not be too forceful. It is better for him to learn on his own that persistence is important." Four of the professors and two of the teachers responded that the spirit of ganbare should come from the child. "Ganbare should come from the child's internal motivation," said one professor. "If the child is able to use this enthusiastic approach for a certain task, it is fine, but the issue should not be forced." An enthusiastic girl's comments summed up this concept, "I was told by my mom that it is okay for me to spend some money, but even though I would like to spend it, I hold on to it, so I still have some money with me."

A negative or hostile atmosphere can hinder the child's persistence. Corno (1993) indicated that a positive aspect of volition (strength of will) is that it helps one to keep focus on tasks, but conversely, it may make it harder for one to cease tasks and to reconsider goals that have already been undertaken. For instance, the director of the school reported:

> Saying ganbare to children is okay to a certain extent, however, everybody has different talents or dispositions. We need to find each person's individual talents and help them develop to their maximum ability, but we must be careful in this. Just because we want a child to be successful in music, for example, we cannot tell him to ganbare in music if he has no interest or talent in that area. Pressure on the child may cause depression in this instance.

The emphasis on the spirit of ganbare by the adults seemed to relate to the importance of the process rather than the product. Our observation agrees with that of White's (1987), which claims that in Japan the act of persistence itself is more impotant than the end accomplishment. One teacher postulated: "I attempt to induce this enthusiasm into children who don't even want to attempt a task. I say to them, 'if you don't try, how do you know whether or not you can do it?'" Another teacher commented in a similar manner, "Well, I want to inspire the children in my care to have the determination to pursue a task to the end, because we don't really know what we are capable of unless we try." One mother also noted, "I want my child to develop a willingness to attempt things even if she may not be able to prevail in the end. The important thing is her willingness to try." The comments made by the mother of a kindergarten boy summed up the importance of the process:

> No matter what the outcome of my child's task may be, it is very important for him to make the effort and to be persistent. In the long run, the persistence itself will be the big plus in his life. He will develop the confidence that if he is willing to set his mind to it, he can accomplish almost anything.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONFIDENCE

Out of the 51 adults, 30 considered the spirit of ganbare to be related to the

development of confidence and satisfaction in accomplishing a task. As one mother remarked, "I tell my child to persevere, hoping that she will experience confidence and satisfaction in the doing." A teacher agreed, stating, "When children persist to the end, it builds their confidence, and it enhances their satisfaction of having accomplished a task," Another teacher verified this opinion without hesitation, "It is of ultimate importance for them to put forth their best effort, because that way children can experience joy and satisfaction in accomplishing a task."

The children like the adults appeared to use ganbare when they wanted to motivate and encourage someone to do their best. Of the 50 children, 43 commented that they express this fervor when they want to encourage their parents, family members, and friends to succeed. According to one boy, "I tell my dad and mom to ganbare when they are cleaning the house." Another stated, "I say ganbare to my friends who can't finish lunch or who are playing games." In the words of one girl, "I say ganbare to my parents when they are swimming." Yet another girl revealed, "I encourage my friends to ganbare when they are racing or sumo wrestling. I also say this to my friends when they are engaging in our sports contests." This supports Singleton's notion of ganbare, which described this word as being used among members of a group in order for them to encourage each other in cooperative activites (1989).

The adults used the term in reference to a variety of things such as eating, recovering from illness, playing, studying, practicing sports, and engaging in a particular task. As one teacher affirmed:

> I communicate the ganbare spirit to the children in my class even when they fall ill. I encourage them to persist, tell them to get well soon, and send them home. I even convey this message of encouragement to children who are slow in eating their lunch. And of course, I especially express this when I think children can do well if they only make an effort.

Another teacher even expressed this word of encouragement when telling children to pick up their toys, "I tell my charges to persist and to clean up well." One mother

related, "I impart a persistent attitude to my children on many various occasions, including such activities as swimming, sports, piano practice, and play." Another mother remarked, "I emphasize the importance of ganbare to my child every time he is trying to do something, or playing, especially when he is discouraged." These adult obervations have been supported to some extent by play reserachers (e, g., Smilansky, 1968; Sylva, Roy, & Painter, 1980; Trawick-Smith, 1994), who have suggested that persistence in play is related to children's later development.

Many adults related that they expressed encouragement spontaneously. Encouraging children through the spirit of ganbare appears to be a habitual and recurring practice. Research review indicates that persistence is one of the important determinants of success in learning (e.g., Rosegrant & Bredekamp, 1992; Rosegrant & Cooper, 1986). Teachers and others need to support children in order for them to strengthen and maintain persistence at learning tasks. One of the teachers explained, "I don't even think much about it. I use the word spontaneously when a child is working on a task or is even eating lunch or playing..." A mother offered this observation, "I encourage my child all the time. Even though it may be nonverbal, from my heart I am always trying to motivate her with the spirit of ganbare." The head teacher asserted, "The expression of this word of encouragement occurs naturally, and, I believe, spontaneously."

THE IMPORTANT FACTOR IN CHILDREN'S LIVES

An overwhelming number of adults (9 teachers and 36 mothers) in this study reported that ganbare was very important in children's lives. As one teacher asserted, "It is very important for children to be persistent because in this way they can learn to pursue their tasks till the very end." As one mother opined, "Ganbare is very important because my child will experience the joy of accomplishment through persistence, even if she thought she was unable to do a task in the very beginning." The present observations are supported by Befu (1986), who stated that Japanese generally consider that if one tries very hard, one can do anything because spiritual substance will make it possible to overcome material obstacles.

When asked which factor, persistence or natural talent, is more closely related to

their children's later success in school, a majority of the mothers and teachers responded that ganbare was the more important of the two. This supports the observations made by Singleton (1989), who found that comparing children's achievements, with their IQs was irrelevant, because persistence or effort was the Japanese key to educational acheivement. Two mothers insisted that a persistent attitude was 100% more important than talent in determining children's later success in school. Nine teachers and 23 mothers claimed that ganbare was 70 to 80 percent more important than talent as a determining factor of this later success. Of the 36 mothers, 35 gave their responses to this question. However, the 4 professors and 10 of the mothers believed that ganbare and talent were equally important.

Discussion

Ganbare was widely and spontaneously used by the children and by the adults. The children interpreted the inherent tone in ganbare as being one of positive encouragement, although the adults speculated that overuse may pressure children. The adults reported that presistance should come from children, and their observations suggested that persistence that is internally controlled is better than that externally controlled. Research review regarding locus of control agrees with the adults' observations stating that internally controlled children tend be responsible for their behavior and to be successful in their academic tasks (Zanden, 1993). Ganbare emphasizes the importance of the process rather than the end product. The adults expressed the opinion that children need to be educated to believe that they can do almost anything if they only try. This observation was supported in the report by Kantrowitz and Takayam (cited in Kantrowitz Wingert, 1989) indicating that adults in Japan tell children if they work hard at anything they do, they can succeed at almost anything. The children and adults expressed encouragement in such various occasions as meals, work, sports, and games. In some cases, the adults even provided support in situations that were beyond anyone's control, for instance, telling sick children to persist and get well.

Most adults in this study, especially the mothers and teachers, believed that persistence in the preschool years was a strong indicator of children's later success in

school. They also reported that by persisting at a task or anything they take on, children will experience the joy of their accomplishments. However, the six professors claimed that perseverance and talent were of equal importance in determining children's later success in school. In order to understand the importance of nurturing diligence in children, we recommend that there be more studies emphasizing effort as a salient factor for later success in school, rather that talent or intelligence. Additionally, we suggest expanding this study to include school-age children.

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Appendix

Questions for children

1. When your parents or teachers say "ganbare" to you, how do you feel? Tell me about that.
2. What does "ganbare" mean to you?
3. When do they say this word to you?
4. What do you think you have to do when someone says "ganbare" to you?
5. Have you ever told someone to "ganbare"? Tell me about that.

Questions for adults

1. Tell me about your concept of ganbare.
2. What does "ganbare" mean to you when you say it to your children?
3. When do you use this word?
4. Tell me your thoughts about the importance of children making an effort in everything they do.
5. Which factor is more closely related to children's later success in school, ganbare or natural talents?